TRIBAL UNREST IN CHOTA-NAGPUR IN THE LATE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY

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The purpose of this paper is to focus attention on the tribal unrest in the hilly and jungly areas of Chota-Nagpur in South Bihar in the last quarter of the eighteenth century.[1]

Soon after the British occupation of the inaccessible tribal areas of the Chota-Nagpur plateau, troubles started in almost every quarter—Palbhum, Manbhum, Ranchi, Palamau and other areas. In 1773 the Ghatshila and Palamau disturbances were suppressed with great difficulty. In 1781 the Birbhum tribesmen rose in protest against the extortionate demands of the Zamindar and his agents.

Since the tribesmen were used to a peculiar type of freedom they did not like the new forms of encroachment upon their age-old customs. One of the main reasons for resistance was to be found in the revenue system imposed by the East India Company. When in 1787 the district magistrate and collector came to enjoy the triple powers of a revenue agent, judge and police-magistrate, the tribesmen rose again. In Birbhum the payment of the revenue dues was withheld. Jaggernath (Jagannath) Choudhary, Bihari Pal and Kalloo Mandal raised the banner of revolt against the British authorities.[2] The Bengal Government first asked the district authorities to summon the defaulters and in the case of non-compliance to imprison them or attach their property. Failing this the commandar-in-chief was requested to order a company of the sepoys from the detachment stationed at Jhalda to march into Birbhum to assist the collector.

According to the collector of Birbhum, Jagannath Choudhary and the other two tribal leaders had assembled about four hundred people of the *pargana* and bound them by an oath not to pay the revenue arrears to the government. The rebels instigated the *raiyats* of the neighbouring areas to follow their example.[3] The men of the collector sent to arrest the leaders were beaten up and wounded. The rebel leaders collected money from the villagers to meet their travel expenses to Calcutta where they wanted to contact the higher authorities. Thus they hoped to find the redress of their grievances in the motropolis.

Almost at the same time Pachet in the Ramgarh district was disturbed. The hinduized Raja of Pachet was "a very extravagant debauch".[4] He had given the lands to certain *Sardars* (petty tribal chiefs) who now paid the revenues to the Collector. But now they were left "entirely at the mercy and under the sole authority"[5] of the Raja who felt the encroachment on his independence very sorely and resented the introduction of the non-tribal officials and revenue farmers.

With the introduction of the Decennial Settlement of 1789 fresh disturbances began. The tribesmen of Tamar under the Ramgarh district rose under the leadership of Bishun Mankee and Mangee Mankee who collected about 3,000 men, burnt three villages of Raja Govind Sah, seized all the *ghats* (hill passes) and declared that they would not pay any revenue to the Raja[6]. When the Raja's men went to recover the hundred mounds of grain they had seized, they drove them away with arrows and clubs.

Around June, 1789 the British sepoys under Chirag Ali sent to capture Bishun and Mangee were repulsed with a heavy loss. Mangee Mankee barricated the entrances to his village and ordered the heads of the four captured sepoys to be cut off and affixed at the corners of his village.[7] Since the British troops could not procure provisions for the sepoys who were "extremely sickly"[8] it was thought expedient to withdraw the troops until the rains were over, the more so because of the local zamindars conniving with the rebels.[9]

The Chota-Nagpur Raja demanded the revenue from his subordinate, Raja Govind Sah, who in his turn extracted more and more from the *mankees* (tribal chiefs).[10] The Collector of Ramgarh argued that the *mankees* should have complained to him rather than taken the law into their own hand. He did not realise that the tribal leaders were not much sophisticated in airing their grievances. The best they could do was to rise in revolt to attract the attention of the authorities.

The Ramgarh Collector pointed out the irregularity in the Chota-Nagpur Raja's payments to the government. The remoteness of the Ramgarh cantonment from the disturbed areas and the yearly transfer of the commanding officer were also said to be responsible for the unrest. But no attention was given to the complaint of Bishun Mankee that the Raja was harassing the peasants by taking away several of their cattles.

The Collector's warnings to Mangee Mankee, Bishun Mankee and others[11] of Tamar that the troops would be sent to punish them if they did not pay off the revenue dues or come personally to explain their conduct, failed.

The real grievance of the ryots was the utter confusion in which the Chota-Nagpur Raja, a hinduised chief, had kept his territories. His method of collecting revenue was, to say the least, oppressive: he used force; had no regard for any engagement whatsoever and exacted a tax called *dudh* (*milk*). Very often the Raja posed as an independent chief and whenever pressed by the British forces, fled to the neighbouring Maratha territory. The Ramgarh Collector even tried some conciliatory measures through presents, etc., but of no avail. He therefore thought that the Raja should be pensioned off.[12]

The most tragic aspect of the whole opisode was the apathy of the local chiefs who had become hinduized and were assisted by the Hindu and Muslim *Sazawals* (petty revenue official), *harkaras* (messengers) and others in the collection of revenues. The British authorities could not get in touch with the tribal ryots because they were separated by the non-tribal officers of the smaller Zamindar, the Chota-Nagpur raja and their own office.

Without getting to the roots of the trouble or making an in-depth study of the social and economic tension generated by the British rule the British authorities sent the unsympathetic non-tribal subordinate officers to the disturbed areas, failing which they sent the troops to suppress the tribesmen. When Raja Govind Sah in his petition of 29 May, 1789 asked the Ramgarh Collector that the Company's revenues would be adversely affected if the British troops did not assist him. the district authorities decided to take some drastic military action. They should perhaps have enquired through those who know the language whether Raja Govind Sah was right in alleging that all the Zamindars of the area had tried to convince the tribal rebels that the territories belonged to the East India Company and the behaviour of the tribesmen was improper.[13]

By July, 1789 the Ramgarh authorities deputed an officer to find out the causes of the unrest and to assure the people who had joined the rebels of "a strict and speedy redress of any grievance" if they returned peacefully. [14]. The investigating officer found out that the tribesmen of Tamar had never paid any revenue to the Chota-Nagpur raja before they were conquered by Major Crawford in 1783. Since this subjugation they had been overawed by the British troops stationed at Chittarpore (Chatrapur) and Jhalda but the simmering discontent was there. In fact, they were never reconciled to the British yoke which had tightened the grip of the local chiefs over the tribal peasantry. The Ramgarh Magistrate also thought that the unrest resulted more particularly from the universal oppression, mismanagement and want of method which prevailed throughout Chota-Nagpur.

By 1792 the unrest spread to Patkum and Bamanghati.[15] In fact, the whole plateau of Chota-Nagpur remained in turmoil from 1787 to 1793. After the Permanent Settlement of the land revenue in 1793 there started another phase of the unrest in the *pargana* Barabhum: Lachman Singh assembled about 500 *chuars* (thieves) and plundered the whole area.[16]

Budhu Munda, one of the companions of Bishun Mankee, Gajraj Singh and others were arrested with great difficulty and later they were tried for robbery and plunder.[17]

It will be no exaggeration to say that the introduction of the Permanent Settlement of the land revenue in this undeveloped tribal area created a havoc among the tribal people. The Ramgarh Collector Hunter reported:[18]

> *"The ignorance and poverty of the natives present so many almost insuperable obstacles to the enforcing of the Regulations regarding Pottaha (pattas or confirmation of the title by the zamindars) that I know not what to devise or what to suggest."*

The first problem was to acquire at least some acquaintance with *bigha* and kattha and their proportion to the tribal measurements of *bounds* and *khats*[19] without which they could not accept the *pattas* with the new measurement of land.[20] The Ramgarh Collector felt that there should be sufficiently educated men to explain to them the *pattas*, etc. Those in charge of the collections should also be literates who could grant proper

receipts to the ryots. He was conscious of the fact that the *patwaris* should be restrained from falsifying the accounts of the ryots (raiyats). And most of the members of the newly organised police department of 1793 were corrupt. Yet he thought that a strong military force was also necessary to maintain peace there.

By 1794 the difficulties faced by the officers enforcing the Cornwallis regulations in the tribal areas came to be realized. The Ramgarh Collector, for example, pointed out that the introduction of the *Pattas* would mean the abolition of the immemorial customs and usages and would require much time, labour and vexation. Whatever the advantages expected from the introduction of the *patta* he said, the "ignorance nad stupidity of the people" would lead to a lot of confusion.[21]

The other parts of Chota-Nagpur also had the same story to tell. In the village of Raigarh dacoity with murder and plunder continued in 1791.[22] In September, a few *sardars* like Kishan Singh, Narain Singh and Govind Bhanj with 400 rebels came from the territories of Rani Sumati Dey, the widow of Raja Damodar Bhanj, the late zamindar of Bamanghati, burnt the houses of the *raiyats* of Dharampur and Lal Bazar near Kila Naya Basawan and wounded several ryots.

Patkum was also disturbed. Now after five years Gajraj Singh who in 1792 with Bishun Mankee and others of Tamar had plundered and laid waste Patkum and for whose arrest Major Farmer had been sent with a battalion of sepoys and two guns, came back to associate himself with Raghuditya, a turbulent and refractory member of the Raja's family. Assisted again by Mohan Singh, a jagirdar of Singhbhum, they collected many people to throw the *pargana* into confusion. The Government therefore ordered the establishment of a police *thana* in Patkum *pargana* and sanctioned a reward of Rs. 1,000 for the arrest of the rebels.[23]

Pachet was also affected. Asman Roy with a group of two hundred men plundered the villages near Raghunathpur and murdered Raghu Digwar and his son who tried to contain the rebels.[24] Unfortunately the British authorities instead of trying to ascertain the causes of the unrest increased the number of troops and asked the local zamindars to help them in hunting down the rebels.[25]

The nature of this populist or millenary movement was almost the same in every pocket of Chota-Nagpur, the rebels plundering and burning the villages and the British troops chasing and hunting them. Some British officers did realize the popular discontent among the tribesmen against the British system of administration. But nothing was done to understand the sentiments of the people or their customs. Presumably if the tribal leaders like the *ghatwals, mankees mundas* and *pahans,* rather than the hinduised chiefs, had been taken into confidence, much of the bloodshed might have been avoided.

Most of the British Officials thought that all the tribesmen were criminals who could only be tamed by harsh methods. So whenever they rose they were sought to be crushed by the army. After all the demands of

the tribal people were simple: they wanted the exploitation and oppression by the non-tribal officers, merchants and money-lenders to stop so that they could, as in the past, live in peace. The eyes of the authorities were partially opened towards the end of the eighteenth century, but no long term administrative reforms were attempted. Naturally the unrest continued unabated till it culminated in the Kol Insurrection of 1831-32 and the Bhumij Revolt of 1832-33.[26]

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5. *Ibid.*

6. Ramgarh Collector to Board of Rev., 30 June, 1789, Beng. Rev. Cons. 1 July, 1789 (51/39).
   Also *Arzee* [Petition of Raja Govind Saha. 23 April, 1789, Beng. Rev. Cons. 19 Aug., 1789 (51/54).]

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8. Beng. Rev. Cons. 26 August, 1789 (51/45).

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10. Ramgarh Collector to Board of Rev., 14 July, Beng. Rev. Cons. 19 Aug., 1789 Part III (51/44).

11. Beng. Rev. Cons. 26 Aug., 1789 (51/45): Lal Mankee, Dussa Mankee and others had murdered the sepoys. Manjhi owed Rs. 300 and Bishun Rs. 200.

12. Beng. Rev. Cons. 19 Aug., 1789, Part III (51/44).

13. Beng. Rev. Cons. 19 Aug., 1789 (51/44).

14. Ramgarh Collector to Board of Rev., Beng. Rev. Cons. 19 Aug., 1789, Part III (51/54).

15. Beng. Rev. Cons. 14 of 29 March, 1793 (53/1).

16. Midnapore Magt. to Govt., 19 July, Beng. Judl. Cons. 2 of 1 Aug., 1794 (128/13).

17. Beng. Rev. Cons. 2 of 30 May, 1794 (53/17).

18. 10 April, 1794, Beng. Rev. Cons. 2 of 30 May, 1794 (53/17).

19. The Collector found out that one *Khat* of land equalled 18 *katthas* and ten *khats* made one bound or about 9 *bighas*.

20. Ramgarh Collector to Board of Rev., 10 April, 1794, Beng. Rev., Cons. 2 of 30 May, 1794 (53/17).

21. Hunter to Board of Revenue, 10 April, Beng. Rev. Cons. 2 of 30 May, 1794 (53/17).

22. Bengal Cr. Judl. Cons. 5 of 7 July, 1797 (128/33).

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26. The author has published *The Kol Insurrection of Chota-Nagpur*, Thacker Spink & Co., Calcutta, 1964, and the *Bhumij Revolt of 1832-33*, Munshiram Manoharlal, Delhi, 1967.